



Coming Home to Yourself

Unconditional Presence, the Body, and Healing Emotional Homelessness

Many people come to therapy hoping to feel better, understand themselves, reduce symptoms, or improve their relationships. These are important goals. But underneath many symptoms there is often a deeper wound: the feeling of not having a secure emotional home inside oneself.

This wound often begins in childhood, especially when caregivers may have provided physical survival but could not consistently offer emotional safety, delight, protection, attunement, or a reliable sense of belonging. A child in this situation may grow up feeling that home is not something that naturally exists inside relationship. Instead, home becomes something that must be earned, managed, searched for, or protected.

Rather than growing into an adult who carries an inner sense of home wherever they go, the person may unconsciously look for another person, relationship, achievement, or role to finally create that feeling. Relationships can become less about mutual connection and more about finding the place where the nervous system can finally rest.

This is what we might call **emotional homelessness**. Emotional homelessness is not simply loneliness. It is the deeper feeling of having no reliable place to belong, no secure base inside oneself, and no steady inner experience of “I am okay here.” Because the original wound happened in relationship, later relationships often become the stage where the old longing tries to resolve itself. Love becomes intertwined with safety. Approval becomes intertwined with belonging. Rejection feels not merely disappointing, but existential, as though home itself is being taken away. When this wound is activated, the nervous system may begin scanning for signs of abandonment, criticism, withdrawal, disappointment, or dismissal. Even ordinary disagreements can awaken the old fear: “I have nowhere to belong.”

The Strategies We Used to Survive

As adults, people often respond to emotional homelessness in one of two ways.

Some try to become indispensable. They take care of others, anticipate needs, fix problems, over-function, and sacrifice themselves in order to earn their place. They may become highly attuned to what others need while losing touch with their own inner experience.

Others become fiercely independent. They learn not to need anyone. They may appear self-sufficient and strong, while secretly longing to be fully known, chosen, and received.

Many people move back and forth between these two positions: trying hard to earn connection, then withdrawing when connection feels unsafe or disappointing.



Neither strategy creates true home, because both are organized around fear. One says, “I must earn my place.” The other says, “I must not need a place.” Healing begins when we no longer have to live from either extreme.

The deeper question becomes:

How do I become a home for myself while remaining open to real connection with others?

This does not mean emotional isolation or radical self-reliance. It means developing an inner experience that says:

I belong to myself. My worth does not disappear when someone misunderstands me, disappoints me, or leaves. I can stay with myself, even when relationship is painful or uncertain.

Letting Yourself Have Your Experience

The journey from self-hatred to self-love begins with learning to meet, accept, and open to the experience you are actually having.

Genuine self-acceptance is not possible while you are resisting, judging, avoiding, or trying to manipulate what you feel. Whenever you judge the experience you are having, you put yourself at odds with yourself. This creates inner division: one part of you feels something, while another part attacks, dismisses, or tries to control it. The way out of shame and self-blame is through making friends with your experience, no matter what that experience is.

This can be difficult because many of us were never taught how to relate honestly and directly to what we feel. Instead, we were taught to get away from difficult feelings: distract, perform, explain, numb, fix, spiritualize, analyze, or push through.

Often, when people are invited to feel something painful, they say:

“I’ve felt this sadness my whole life. What good is it to keep feeling it?”

This makes sense. There is often a hidden belief underneath the resistance:

“If I really feel this, it will pull me down into a bottomless hole.”

That belief often comes from the child-self inside us who truly did not have the capacity to process overwhelming pain. As children, our sadness, fear, loneliness, or shame may have been bigger than we were. We did not have the internal resources, relational support, language, or nervous-system capacity to hold it. So we shut down, tightened, dissociated, performed, adapted, or escaped.

That was not weakness. It was survival. But as adults, we can gradually learn to relate to our experience in a new way. We do not have to be swallowed by feelings, and we do not have to run from them. There is a middle path: meeting our experience with awareness, compassion, and enough space. This is what John Welwood called **unconditional presence**.



Unconditional presence does not mean passively drowning in emotion. It does not mean wallowing, collapsing, indulging, or becoming overwhelmed. That kind of suffering is unconscious suffering. Unconditional presence means actively meeting what is here with awareness. It means saying:

Yes, this is the feeling that is here right now.

Yes, this is the sensation in my body.

Yes, this is the fear, sadness, longing, numbness, shame, anger, or loneliness that is asking to be met.

When we can touch a feeling consciously, without judging it or becoming lost in it, something begins to change. The feeling is no longer an enemy. It becomes part of our lived experience that can be known, held, and digested.

The Body as a Place of Knowing

Much of our culture teaches us to live “upstairs,” in the head. We think about our feelings, explain them, analyze them, justify them, and create stories about them. Thinking is useful, but when we live only in the conceptual mind, we become disconnected from the body, heart, intuition, and the immediacy of life.

The body is not merely an object to be managed, judged, exercised, or fixed. The body experienced from within is a field of living presence. It carries sensation, feeling, memory, intuition, aliveness, contraction, grief, longing, and wisdom.

The body has its own way of knowing. Sometimes we know something in our belly before we can explain it. Sometimes the heart understands what the mind cannot yet organize. Sometimes the body tightens, opens, freezes, softens, or leans forward before thought has caught up.

This kind of knowing is not abstract. It is immediate, felt, and relational.

We might think of three dimensions of embodied knowing:

The sensation body — the body as grounded physical presence. This includes breath, weight, pressure, temperature, tension, vibration, and the sense of being here.

The feeling body — the body as emotional flow and relatedness. This includes sadness, tenderness, anger, fear, joy, longing, love, and the ways we are affected by life and other people.

The awareness body — the body as spacious, wakeful presence. This is the part of us that can notice sensations, feelings, and thoughts without being completely identified with them.



When these dimensions are available, we feel more grounded, connected, open, and present. We have access to inner resources such as strength, kindness, clarity, compassion, and steadiness. But when we are wounded, threatened, or overwhelmed, these deeper resources can become covered over by old conditioning.

The Conditioned Body

Old pain does not live only as a memory in the mind. It also lives in the body as tension, emotional reactivity, and fixed beliefs.

We might think of this as the **conditioned body**.

The conditioned body is made of what we have not yet been able to fully feel, process, digest, or understand. These unfinished experiences may show up as muscular tension, anxiety, depression, shutdown, shame, emotional flooding, numbness, obsessive thinking, or old stories about who we are.

There are three common forms:

The tension body

This is the body organized around tightening, bracing, holding, and protecting. Tension often begins as a “no” to pain or threat. The body contracts to avoid feeling what once felt unbearable.

The emotional body

This is the body organized around old emotional reactivity. Emotion can sweep us away, while deeper feeling helps us come closer to ourselves. Underneath reactive emotion there is often a more vulnerable feeling: sadness, hurt, longing, fear, tenderness, grief, or love.

The mental body

This is the body-mind organized around fixed beliefs, stories, judgments, and identities. It includes the thoughts that say: “I am too much,” “I am not enough,” “I will be left,” “I have to earn love,” “No one will stay,” or “I cannot trust anyone.”

These patterns are not failures. They were ways of surviving. But when they remain unconscious, they keep replaying and prevent us from living from the deeper wisdom of the body, heart, and awareness.

Healing happens when these frozen structures are brought into warm, nonjudgmental awareness.

Conscious Suffering and Digesting Old Pain

Welwood used the idea of “digesting” experience. Pain that was too much to feel when we were young can remain undigested in the body and psyche. It becomes frozen, solid, and repetitive. Unconditional presence allows old pain to begin digesting.

When we bring awareness to tension, the body may gradually soften.

When we bring awareness to emotion, the feeling may begin to move.

When we bring awareness to thought, identification may begin to loosen.

This is like sunlight touching ice. Awareness does not force the ice to melt. It simply brings warmth, contact, and presence. Over time, what was frozen begins to rejoin the flow of life.



This is the difference between being submerged in feeling and consciously meeting feeling. When we are submerged, we feel helpless, flooded, and identified with the pain.

When we are consciously present, we can say:

This is painful, and I am here with it.

This is fear, and there is also space around the fear.

This is sadness, and I can meet it with kindness.

This is longing, and I do not have to abandon myself inside it.

Eventually, we may discover something surprising:

Our openness is larger than the feeling we are opening to.

Openness to fear is larger than fear itself.

Openness to sadness is larger than sadness itself.

Openness to shame is larger than shame itself.

This discovery puts us in touch with our deeper capacity for steadiness, compassion, and self-trust.

Healing Emotional Homelessness

Healing emotional homelessness requires grief.

It means allowing ourselves to acknowledge what was missing rather than minimizing it, explaining it away, or blaming ourselves. There may be profound sadness underneath the longing: grief for the childhood that should have existed but did not.

This grief is not meant to be endured alone. It is often through the safety of an attuned therapeutic relationship that the nervous system begins to learn something new:

Another person can remain present without demanding that I become someone different.

Over time, this experience becomes internalized. What was first borrowed from the therapist, mentor, partner, or trusted other gradually becomes part of one's own inner world. A person begins to develop an internal secure base.

An important part of healing is also noticing how the old wound continues to organize present-day relationships.

We begin to notice:

When do I seek reassurance instead of expressing vulnerability?

When do I over-function instead of trusting others?

When do I abandon myself to preserve connection?

When do I withdraw to avoid disappointment?

When do I turn another person into the only possible source of home?

When do I make rejection mean that I have no place to belong?

These responses do not need to be judged. They were intelligent adaptations. They protected the child-self from unbearable aloneness. The goal is not to eliminate them, but to become free enough that they are no longer automatic.



As healing deepens, relationships begin to change. They are no longer places where we desperately search for home. They become places where we can share the home we are gradually building within ourselves.

The question changes from:

Who will finally make me feel like I belong?

to:

How can I remain fully myself, fully connected, and fully at home, even when relationships are imperfect?

That is the movement from surviving childhood emotional neglect to living with greater emotional freedom.

A Practice of Unconditional Presence

The following practice can help you begin developing an inner sense of home.

Move slowly. Do not force yourself to feel more than feels manageable. If you become overwhelmed, open your eyes, look around the room, feel your feet, name five things you see, or return to your breath. The goal is not intensity. The goal is contact with kindness.

1. Acknowledge

Begin by noticing what is here.

You might ask:

What is my experience right now? What is this like?

Notice sensations, feelings, thoughts, images, impulses, or numbness. Try not to fix or interpret them. As Interpersonal Neuro-biologist Dan Siegel would say, “name it to tame it”. When we put a word to what we were feeling, we begin to regulate it.

Simply acknowledge:

Yes, this is what is here.

If there is sadness, acknowledge sadness.

If there is fear, acknowledge fear.

If there is numbness, acknowledge numbness.

If there is resistance, acknowledge resistance.

Nothing has to be pushed away.

2. Allow

Next, allow the experience to be here with a little more space.

Allowing does not mean liking the feeling, acting it out, or being swallowed by it. It means making room for it in the body.

You might say:

Can I let this be here for a moment?

Can I give this feeling a little breathing room?



Notice the space around the feeling. Notice the chair beneath you, the floor beneath your feet, the room around you. Let the feeling be held inside a larger field of awareness.

3. Open

If it feels possible, gently open toward the experience.

This means letting down the wall against yourself, even slightly.

You might say:

Can I open my heart to myself in this place?

Can I meet this feeling the way I would meet a hurting child or a dear friend?

This is not self-pity. It is self-contact. You are learning to be with yourself where you once felt alone.

4. Enter

This is a more advanced step. Only do this when you feel steady enough.

Gently bring awareness into the center of the body sensation or feeling. Rather than standing outside it, see if you can be present within it.

You may discover that the feeling is not as solid as it seemed. It may shift, move, soften, change shape, or reveal something underneath.

If it becomes too intense, return to allowing and grounding.

Daily Practice: Building an Inner Home

Spend ten minutes each morning sitting quietly.

Place one hand over your heart or abdomen. Feel your breathing without trying to change it. Feel the support of the chair beneath you and the ground beneath your feet.

Then gently ask:

What is my experience right now?

Notice what is present: sadness, loneliness, fear, peace, numbness, irritation, longing, or contentment. Imagine that each feeling is welcome, just as you would hope a loving parent would welcome a child arriving home after a difficult day.

Next ask:

What would help me feel a little more at home with myself today?

Do not look outside yourself for a dramatic answer. Listen for something small and concrete:

Slow down.

Take a walk.

Eat lunch without rushing.

Call a trusted friend.

Set a healthy boundary.

Rest.

Clean one small space.



Speak to yourself with kindness.

Let yourself feel what is here without fixing it.

Finish by placing a hand over your heart and saying slowly:

I am here with you.

I am not leaving.

You do not have to earn your place with me.

The words themselves are less important than the repeated experience of becoming a reliable emotional companion to yourself.

Like a child who gradually learns that someone comes when they cry, your nervous system slowly learns through repetition that home is no longer something you must search for only in the world.

It is something you are building within yourself, one moment of faithful presence at a time.

Closing Reflection

Letting yourself have your experience is not a technique for getting rid of feelings. It is a way of coming into relationship with yourself.

When you stop fighting your experience, you no longer have to divide yourself against yourself.

You begin to discover that beneath shame, fear, longing, and emotional homelessness there is something deeper: a capacity for presence, warmth, openness, and belonging.

When you show up for your experience, your deeper being begins to show up for you.

This is how you come home to yourself.

It is important to recognize that some wounds are more accurately understood as abandonment trauma with a capital "T." Although the practice described above can still be helpful, these deeper wounds may require something more than solitary self-reflection. They often need the presence of a skilled therapist who can provide enough safety, steadiness, and attunement for you to enter the experience without becoming overwhelmed or lost inside it. In that kind of relationship, you do not have to face the wound alone. The therapist helps you remain connected to the present while gradually approaching, feeling, and integrating what was once too much to bear.

The above process is a combination of the work of John Welwood, Eugene Gendlin, Diana Fosha, Murray Bowen and of my 30 years of work with my clients in private practice.

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